

A Front Row Seat to the Jordan Show

**An Honors Thesis HONR 499**

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Blackmer", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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**Abstract**

Collaboration is an essential part of any college experience. Learning how to work and interact with others is a skill that is crucial for any individual aspiring to have a career. It is also a skill I did not fully understand before college. This thesis focuses on my experience with collaboration during “The Liars’ Bench,” an immersive learning seminar at the Virginia Ball Center. “The Liars’ Bench” required me to work with fifteen other students to create an original musical about Nashville, TN. Through the format of a memoir, I explore what conditions provide a successful collaborative experience and analyze my growth as a collaborator during this project.

## Author's Statement:

I spent my last semester at Ball State University participating in a seminar at the Virginia Ball Center. It was called *The Liars' Bench* and the end goal was to write a full-length musical set in 1920's Brown County, Indiana. I chose to write my thesis about this incredible process in the form of a memoir. During my time as a creative writing major at Ball State, nonfiction was my favorite genre because it was a perfect vehicle for exploring and analyzing self-growth.

Collaboration is something I have always struggled with, and this project involved working with fifteen other students, none of whom I knew. *Front Seat Tickets to the Jordan Show* chronicles my journey from a reluctant and insecure collaborator to a proud and confident member of the team. Through my writing, I explored why I always felt the need to prove myself and control every situation. I realized that it was not arrogance, but insecurity. I came to the conclusion that I was afraid that people would not like me, the person, so I led heavily with what I knew they would like, the talent. I did not realize this about myself before writing my thesis.

Throughout my time in the Honors College at Ball State, I took classes that urged students to always question and analyze. These classes taught me that contradiction was a natural and confusing part of life and that correct answers were almost equivalent to fairy tales. I began to realize that there was no such thing as black and white but instead an infinite palate of gray.

I, myself, was a walking contradiction. Many times, I hated collaborating with others. I always believed that my ideas were the best and got frustrated when I

would have to explain myself. I would take criticism personally. During the process of *The Liars' Bench* seminar, I realized that the ideas of many were always greater than the ideas of one. I also learned that I was, by nature, good at collaborating and actually enjoyed it. I began to question why this project was so different than other ventures in my life. After thinking about my best experiences with collaboration, I found that the greatest results had come from working with individuals I trusted enough to be honest with. It was also essential that we respected each other and were working towards an end goal instead of personal validation.

It was much easier to work with others and hear their criticism when I believed they liked who I was, not just what I did. Being vulnerable was difficult but essential to produce a good creative product. Being a part of *The Liars' Bench* forced me to use all of what I had learned throughout college but had never been able to consistently apply. Every group project, personal essay, and class debate had been preparing me for this. Through *The Liars' Bench*, I made new friends and helped create a product I am proud of, but more importantly, I learned how to work with others to achieve a common goal. This was the most important lesson of my college career.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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## Jordan

Education redefined. This is Ball State University's calling card. In high school, I saw the phrase plastered on billboards and heard it echoed repeatedly on tv and radio commercials. Every alumni pamphlet and magazine that my parents received had a story about that semester's group of "immersive learning" projects. These always intrigued me. I was sick of cinderblock style education, memorization, and standardized regurgitation. I wanted to do something real, something creative and exciting. I kept this in mind as I made my college decision and ended up at Ball State in August of 2009.

My freshman through senior years were a blur of newfound freedom, friends, and majors. I couldn't settle on what I wanted, mostly because I didn't know. I was constantly busy, playing gigs on the drums, writing, and recording an album with my band, Trackless. I forgot all about immersive learning until the middle of my senior year, while I was out for drinks with Trackless. We were talking about how to stand out, how to "make it" in the music industry. It hit me around beer three.

"Guys! I think I just had an idea," I yelled, interrupting my bass player's lecture on the importance of leather pants.

They stared at me, half scared by my sudden outburst, half intrigued.

"Well...you gonna tell us or just sit there and think about it?" Will, the guitar player coaxed.

I shot him a look. "Ok. You know how Ball State has these immersive project things? Like Circus in Winter and stuff?" Everyone knew about Circus in Winter. A student-made musical that was currently headed to Broadway.

Collective nod.

"What if we did one? With Trackless as the focus?"

Collective pondering.

"How would it work though? Us as a project?" Jeremy, vocals.

"I don't know exactly. But what if we started a record label, a professional one, with Trackless as the first artist. We could incorporate all sorts of majors, like PR and marketing, graphic design, business, music media and production, t-comm...every position could correspond with a real life position in the music industry."

Collective excitement.

I continued, talking faster. "We could have our entire next album recorded, produced, and marketed! And learn how the industry works." Another idea hit me. "We could even have an end goal of being on David Letterman or something!"

"That's ridiculous," our bass player said, but I could tell he was excited.

"Is it though? Why not aim high?" I ask.

Everyone agreed. We spent the next several hours planning everything out, filling a notepad with ideas, people we knew in other majors that would want to be a part, faculty to contact. I went home more excited than I'd ever been about something related to school. I pictured my photo on Ball State's website. I thought about how great this would look on my resume, if I would even need one after the

project was finished. That's how awesome it was going to be. Over the next several months, I spent time getting things together. I had several meetings with a teacher who I'd asked to advise my project. He told me my plan looked good and that he just had to submit everything by October.

That summer, I set up a meeting with Beth Turcotte, the advisor behind the Circus in Winter project. I had my notebook ready and was about to puke from excitement.

"Come on in!" she yelled when I knocked on her office door. "You must be Jordan," she said. "Your project sounds really exciting from what you've told me in through emails."

I smiled as she arranged the papers on her desk.

"So we're looking to get it going for fall 2015, right?"

I was sure she had just assumed incorrectly. "No, I'd like to do it this spring, 2014. I'm graduating at the end of this school year."

"Oh, ok. So you've already got all the paperwork handed in and gotten it approved then?" she asked as if I definitely had.

"My advisor said it just had to be in by October so we're getting that all finalized," I replied.

She paused for a moment considering her next words carefully. "The forms for spring projects do have to be turned in by October...October of the school year prior."

I sat as the weight of the situation sunk in. "Oh," was all I could muster.

We both sat silent but I could almost hear our brains working. We were trying to find a way to make it happen. "Isn't there anything we could do?" I asked when I realized there was no way I was going to have the answer.

"Let me try a few things," she said, determined. I was thankful for her tenacity. It seemed like if anyone could make it happen, it would be her. She called the dean and several other people important to the process, and even set up a meeting with some of them. But she wasn't hopeful.

"I don't think this project is going to be able to happen the way you planned," she said finally. I could tell she was genuinely sorry she couldn't help more.

"It's ok," I said, very close to tears. It was not.

She sat for another minute. "You know, even though yours probably won't work out, there is another one you might be interested in that has to do with music."

"Really?" I asked, less than excited but wanting to hear her out because of all the work she had just put into trying to help me.

"Yeah, Jen Blackmer's doing a musical. Writing one. About Brown County, really interesting place down in Southern Indiana. Would you be interested in helping with that?"

No. Not really. "Sure."

"Let me see if I can get Jen on the phone," she said as she dialed the number.

I heard a muffled "Hello?" on the other end. Beth proceeded to explain my situation and I zoned out, thinking of the great opportunity I had just watched disappear. This was my chance to make something of myself. I'd had dreams about

it, told everyone I knew about it. Just as the embarrassment set in, Beth extended the phone towards me.

“She wants to talk to you,” she mouthed.

I cleared my throat and hoped my voice didn’t sound too shaky. We talked for a few minutes about the seminar she was running. She was pumped. Her energy intrigued me more than what she was saying, but that was enough. If someone that passionate was in charge of something, it would at least be a memorable experience.

I applied for and was accepted into the seminar. It was called *The Liars’ Bench*, and I would be working with 15 other people to create a full length musical. Our first meeting was at the Virginia Ball Center, a beautiful old mansion. Everyone was chatting with each other when I walked in, and it was clear they were all friends. 15 to one were not good odds. I came to the realization that I might have zero control over the direction of this musical.

When the meeting ended, we were free to roam the house and look around. No one talked to me. I slipped out unnoticed. As I was falling asleep that night, I sent a text to my mom. “I think doing this project was a bad idea,” to which she replied “It will be if you keep thinking that.”

## Sarah

“So, what are you playing?” Sarah said, though it sounded more like an accusation. I had a guitar in my hand and was strumming a G chord. We had all been divided into small groups and told choose an instrument to play. We had to come up with something to play together for the class. At first I had been excited about this. Music was my thing, and I was eager to give people a reason to like me. It wasn’t looking promising so far. I tried to show her slowly, saying the names of the notes as I went. “Ok no. I don’t get notes and stuff. That’s just going to confuse the shit out of me. I don’t do music.”

She was obviously flustered. “Um...ok well...just find the note that sounds like this and play the same rhythm on it?” I offered.

She tried again and found the note for a second before throwing her hands up. “I just don’t know. I don’t get it.”

I sat, stunned and awkward. The people I had spent most of my college career around were either my sorority sisters, who were too afraid of what everyone else might think of them to show any real emotion, and musicians, mostly men who had settled themselves into complacency long ago. I wasn’t sure how to help her, and it didn’t seem like she wanted it anyway. It was irritating.

I looked over at Molly, the other member of our group. She was happily plunking out notes on a keyboard, either oblivious to the awkwardness I was feeling or used to the fact that Sarah was regularly a part of such situations. “How’s this?” She said, hitting a chord that clashed intensely with what I was playing.

"Great," I forced through my teeth, and stared down at the strings on my guitar, pretending to try and figure something out. Nothing we were playing went together. I was steadily growing angrier at the fact that we were going to sound terrible.

After fifteen more excruciating minutes, most of which I remained speechless, Jen called us all back together to share what our groups had done. She chose our group first. We performed our attempt at music and I wanted to jump into the fireplace that was burning next to me.

The only thing these people knew about me was that I was a musician. I was supposed to be good at this. I wanted to show them, but we had just sounded like a bunch of kindergartners smacking randomness on our instruments for the first time. Sarah laughed, "Well. Coulda been worse." *Actually, no. It probably couldn't have*, I thought. In that moment, I hated her. She had not only been rude but had ruined my chance to show this group I was good at something. To earn their respect.

I left that day without talking to anyone. When I pulled away in my car, I thought how nice it would be if I didn't have to go back.

## Jess

“Hey, you are literally the coolest person I’ve ever met,” she said as I was getting ready to leave one day.

“Oh,” I said, not really knowing how to respond to that. “You should probably meet more people then,” I smiled.

“No seriously. I checked out your band and stuff online. You guys are so good.”

“Well, thanks,” I said. “You have a great voice,” I offered when I realized that compliments usually worked well both ways.

“Thaaaank yooooooooou,” she sang, doing more vocal runs than I ever thought could be possible on two words. I laughed at the excessiveness, because I thought it was a joke. But then she grinned proudly and I realized she might be serious. I had to stop myself from laughing harder.

“Ok, I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said.

“Byeeeeee,” she sang at me.

What a weirdo. I liked her.



## Bob

The musical we were writing was to take place in 1920's Nashville, IN. We all read a book called "If You Don't Outdie Me," which used photographs taken by Frank Hoenberger to describe the actual residents of the town during that time period. Our story was looking like it would revolve around Frank as the protagonist, but use the characters he took pictures of to show the town. Our first assignment was to write a song and a scene about one of those characters. We had to team up with a partner, assigned to us by Jen. I groaned when I heard this. I preferred to work alone. I was paired with Bob. "Thank God," he said. "I know absolutely nothing about music." *Oh boy*, I thought. *This is going to be interesting*. My hopes were not exactly high.

We began brainstorming and found that one character in particular stood out to both of us. Her name was Allie Ferguson and she was an old innkeeper with an attitude who had befriended Frank during his time in Brown County.

"She's just full of sass," Bob said as I began jotting down notes for the song.

"Yeah, and she kind of seems to hate everything," I added. We both sat in silence for a second before I grabbed my guitar and started strumming one of the only chords I could play. E minor. After a minute I started humming a simple melody.

"I like that," Bob said. I kept playing.

"Words?" I asked.

"Something about how she hates everything. How everything's going to shit and she can't really do anything about it."

I nodded then sang, "The world is falling apart."

"Oh! I love that! Yes!" he was excited. I smiled.

"And all I can do is watch," I continued. "Then she can start complaining about stuff, you know? Like jazz or fashion or politics."

"Yes! This will be so great," Bob said. His excitement made me smile.

We continued writing that way, him throwing ideas out and me paraphrasing them into lyrics. I was surprised by how well it was working, and how much control he let me have over the choices. Basically, if I said it was good, he didn't challenge it. I wondered for a split second if he really did like everything I was coming up with or if he was afraid to say otherwise. Either way, I didn't mind.

By the end of the day, we had a rough draft of the song done. Bob was ecstatic. "Oh my God. We HAVE to show Justin and Molly." He ran out of the room and came back with them not far behind. "Guys. Check out this song we wrote," he said, beaming with pride. I felt the intense need to impress them. This was the first time they had seen me do anything other than the musical disaster with Sarah. It had to be good.

I played what we had of the song for them, and they both clapped at the end. "That was awesome!" Justin said. "Want to hear what we wrote?"

"Yeah!" Bob replied. The competitive voice inside of me hoped it wasn't better than ours. I stopped and tried to remind myself we were on the same team, going for a common goal. The competitive voice told me not to worry about it, because theirs would probably be mediocre.

They started playing and singing, and I realized I was wrong. The song was good, really good. And more than that, I was happy about it. I was so used to fighting to be the best and trying so hard to prove myself that I forgot what it felt like to appreciate the work of others. I was used to picking it apart, not listening. But there was something about how genuine and excited everyone in the room was. It erased the need to be the best and replaced it with a sense of being a part of something greater than just me.

## Sarah

After a few weeks of spending every day with these people, I had still not really connected with anyone. I decided to make the first move.

"Hey, how do you feel about Applebee's?" I asked Bob after class one day.

"Um, amazing," he responded.

"Wanna get half priced apps tonight?"

"Yes! Guys, Applebee's tonight?" he called over to Sarah, Kirsten, and Justin who were sitting on the couch.

"Oh yes, please" Sarah replied instantly. Justin and Kirsten nodded in agreement. "Time?" Great. Negative Nancy was coming.

"9:30?" I said.

"Great!" Bob exclaimed. I wondered how he could possibly smile so much.

"See you there," Sarah said as she turned to Molly, who had just walked in.

"You're my ride, roomie. Hope you're in the mood for wings."

"Oh, always!" Molly said. "See you later Jordan!"

I nodded goodbye, excited at the potential of new friends.

When I arrived, they were already sitting in a big booth. I scooted in between Sarah and Bob. We ordered beers and then started talking. At first, it was just about the seminar. We talked about Brown County and all the characters we'd been writing about. Sarah told us she already had an outline in mind, then spent ten minutes describing it in detail. After that, they started talking about mutual friends

they had in the theatre department. I was no longer involved in the conversation. I waited a while to see if things would steer back towards common ground, but someone's somebody just hooked up with the roommate of someone else, so it didn't look promising. I had an idea.

"Hey, can you guys do something for me?" I asked.

They were intrigued. "Of course! What?" Bob said, excitedly.

"I want you to go through all 15 of the people in this seminar and give me three words that describe them. I don't really know anybody."

"Oh. Yes. Yes we can do that," Sarah said. Everyone was eager for the chance to gossip. They went through name-by-name and carefully picked which words accurately described each individual. It seemed their least favorite person was Joel, a telecommunications major and aspiring director. His three words were pretentious, intelligent, and ass (courtesy of Sarah). Their favorite was Brandy, a musical theatre major from California. Her words were perfect (courtesy of Bob), content, and confident. The funniest description was that of Sarah, who was given angst-y, blunt, and opinionated. She replied fittingly with "Screw you guys," and a smile.

By the time we got through everyone, Applebee's was closing. "Looks like we better head out," I said, nodding at our server who was glaring at us from behind a post.

"But we didn't do your three words yet," Kirsten said.

"How could you guys give me three words? You've known me for a week."

"Oh I think we know enough," Sarah said.

I was terrified. "Um okay. Shoot,"

Collective thinking. "Hmm...passionate," Kirsten said.

"Honest," Molly jumped in.

Collective nodding.

"And voice," Sarah concluded.

"Voice? What do you mean?" I asked.

"Like, the way you talk."

I looked at her for a second trying to decide if this was a good or bad thing.

"You've just got a certain way of talking. At first I thought you'd be a bitch. I didn't really like you."

Well...one of her words *had* been blunt. I was tempted so say "likewise," but thought better of it.

"But you're totally not. It was just the way you talk. Probably all the sarcasm."

I was taken aback. I felt a little offended and self-conscious. In the past, I'd had friends describe me as "chill" and "laid back," though I was the least calm person I'd ever met. And always "talented." That was how most people saw me. Through my talent. This group's description, though not entirely positive, was thoughtful and accurate. It was a description of my personality rather than the things I did. I started to wonder if I acted differently around them or if my friends just didn't really know me at all.

While I was driving back to my apartment, I came to the conclusion that both were true. I felt free to be myself around them. They were all self-proclaimed weirdos. They cared - a lot - about things. I realized that I hadn't been around people

who cared intensely about something for a while. In my sorority, it was considered weird to care too much. Getting worked up was uncomfortable and uncool. Any version of swimming upstream was a good way to end up friendless. At gigs, the musicians I played with were typically cynical, middle-aged men who used to have dreams but now played four dinner parties a week where they had the same function as the music on an elevator. This group was different. They were young and full of goals and dreams, and they were determined to make something happen. They believed in things. And they actually seemed to like me.

## Brandy

She was wearing a goofy hat, the kind with flaps that go over your ears. I had one just like it. She was from California. I wanted to move there. She had been described as perfect. It seemed that we should be friends. There was a slight problem though. She was the only person that hadn't said anything to me yet. I wasn't used to seeking out friends. I preferred to let people come to me. It was easier when you knew they liked you. But I *had* successfully invited Bob, Sarah, and crew to dinner, and we were all friends now. So I thought I'd try again.

"Hey, so I hear you're from California," I said to Brandy as we were both sitting by the fireplace during a break. "I want to move there in a couple years."

"Oh! That's awesome. You'll love it," she replied. "What part?"

"I'm thinking somewhere in Los Angeles so I can pursue music with my band. You live around there?"

"Nope. I live in Orange County. I kind of hate Los Angeles. But that's just me. The traffic is ridiculous."

"Yeah, I've heard that."

Lull. Lull. Lull. What in the hell was I supposed to say now? This is exactly why I hated recruitment for my sorority.

"Jordan!" Kirsten called across the room. "Come help me with this song."

"Alright, coming!" I yelled. I looked back at Brandy and she was talking to someone else. *Well shit. That's the end of that*, I thought and walked over to the piano.



## Jess

"So I came up with these chords last night," she said as she sat down at the piano. "I don't know what they are but I like them." She played for me. We were partners for this song assignment.

"Hmm...Ok. Can I try?" I asked. Some of the chords were a little weird and sounded off. But I thought I could hear what she was going for. She slid over on the bench to make room.

I started by playing exactly what she had. Then I repeated it a few times, changing a few notes here and there. Finally I settled on something that I liked that still sounded like what she had played.

"What do you think of that?" I asked her.

"Yes! That's awesome."

"Ok cool," I was thankful she wasn't mad about me making changes.

We played around with the chords for a while and began to think about the rest of the song. Her melodic ideas were good, but her lyrics were cliché and thoughtless.

"What about 'And this is where I belong?'"

I cringed. "I dunno. It definitely gets the point across but I think it's been used a lot before."

She looked down. "Yeah, I mean I guess so."

Silence.

"I just think we need something a little more specific," I said. I tried singing a few other ideas and none of them really worked.

"I mean I still think it fits there," she said when I stopped playing.

I still didn't. There was no way that line was going into this song. This was the first time someone I'd been working with had really challenged my opinion. It didn't seem like we were going to agree on the line, so I needed to give her an option she liked better. "What if we use a theme from another song to tie it all together?" People had already written most of the songs for the first act. This was supposed to be the opener. "How would you feel about incorporating the line 'I'll do something right?' since Caleb already wrote that into the act one finale? We could say something like, 'I'll do something right, right here.'"

She lit up. "Yes! I love that idea."

After that, the rest of the song came easily. When we were finished, I realized it was the first time I had actually been forced to collaborate with someone during this project. This wasn't just *my* song, and it was my favorite one yet.

## Cameron & Joel

*"Slang adds flavor in my favor, words like reckon with inflection seem offensive in reflection, one must get paid."*

I looked around the room as Cameron sang these quick paced lyrics. I had the words right in front of me and I still couldn't understand what he was saying. The expressions of my classmates ranged from confused to irritated. I felt both. This song was nowhere close to the genre we as a group had been writing in. It sounded disjunct and very musical theatre-y, whereas what we had been writing was more folksy and country. When the song was over, everyone gave half-hearted claps.

"What'd you all think?" Jen asked the group. Everyone froze.

"I like it," Sarah started slowly, "But it seems really different from all the other music we have so far." Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Well what do you mean?" asked Joel, the song's cowriter.

"It's just really heavy on the music theatre side," I said.

"Ha!" Joel laughed sharply. "Are we not writing a musical?"

Lord. "Yes, but we're writing in a style specific to the time and place," someone offered. I was too busy glaring at him to notice who.

The argument continued for a while, but it didn't go anywhere. After class I sat with Kirsten, Bob, Sarah, and Justin. "Man, that song is really not working for me," I said to the group.

"No. Not at all," Bob agreed.

"There is no way in hell that song is going in this musical," Sarah said. "And there's no way Joel will change it. He could barely stand the criticism today."

"Let's talk to Jen about it," Kirsten said, looking at me. "Maybe she'll have some ideas on what to do."

I agreed and we headed to Jen's office. I felt weirdly like a tattletale. If this had been Sarah's song, I would have just talked to her about it. Until this point, that was one thing I really loved about our group. We could be open and honest when we didn't like something, and people usually took criticism really well. We all trusted each other. I felt like the fact that we had to talk to Jen meant we didn't trust them, and they probably didn't trust us either.

We told Jen about our concerns. "Well, let's think about a solution," she said after hearing us out and agreeing that something had to change.

"Jordan, would you feel comfortable working with the two of them to kind of rewrite the song and make it fit better stylistically?"

Dread. Utter fear. That song seemed beyond help and working with Joel sounded about as fun as getting my wisdom teeth pulled. "Sure."

I met with them later in the week. "Let's just scrap it and come up with something else," Cameron said immediately when I sat down. I was relieved.

"Well I don't think we need to scrap *everything*," Joel was not on board with this plan.

"Yeah, I mean we can keep the general ideas the same and some of the lyrics. We just have to change the way the song feels."

"I honestly don't get what's wrong with it in the first place," Joel said.

"I think it's a good song, people are just concerned that it doesn't fit and it seems like it's from a different musical or something," I said. Oh no. I had done thing where I said "people" instead of "I". And I had ended with "or something." Anytime people used these words in collaboration, it was because they were afraid to stand behind their opinions. Usually because they didn't think the other person respected them enough to hear them out and they were afraid of making them mad. It didn't usually lead to a good collaboration.

"Ok," Joel said. "So what should we write?"

"I don't know. Let's just play around with some things and see what we like."

We sat for two hours and bounced ideas off of each other. Everything that they liked, I hated. Everything I liked, they thought was too simple. By the end of the day, all we had to show for our time was a guitar riff that sounded like the Batman theme song on drugs.

## Brandy

The snow was at least two feet deep. "I hope you can get out over there," I said as she struggled out of the car and into the snow bank. We both trekked up to the front door of Caleb's house, laughing about the difficulty of the situation.

"Hey guys!" Caleb said as he opened the door. We nearly fell inside.

"Hello," I said, trying to catch my breath and get the snow out of my shoes.

"We can write in here, I've got a keyboard set up and everything," he gestured to a room off the entryway.

I sat down at the piano and started playing an idea I'd come up with earlier. "What do you guys think about something like this?" We had been assigned to write the finale song. I wanted it to be good.

They sat around me and Caleb strummed the chords on his guitar. We were all humming melodies and throwing out lyrical ideas, trying to get something started. After about an hour, we'd gotten nowhere.

"Hey, I have to leave for a meeting, but I'll be back in like an hour, ok?" I said.

"Sure!" They said.

I walked back inside about five minutes later. "So...my car might be stuck."

"Oh boy," Brandy said.

"Let me get some boots!" Caleb said and ran to his bedroom. They helped push me out and I went to my meeting.

I came back later that afternoon. "So we changed things up a little," Brandy said tentatively as I sat down.

"Oh, ok. How so?"

"Well we figured we were just having a hard time writing with what we had so we thought starting over would be a good plan, you know?" I knew. What she meant to say was that they didn't like it.

"Sure," I said, slightly irritated. "Let me see what you got."

Caleb started strumming a G chord on the guitar. Then a C chord. Then back to G. Then C again. I was wondering if he knew this was the same progression and tempo he'd already written another song in.

"We were thinking something like that," he said, after playing about five variations of G to C.

I nodded. I liked what I'd written much better. Brandy was singing along with the eternal G and C. She liked it. He liked it. I chose to let it go.

"Yeah that's cool," I said, and started working on melodies with them. A few hours later we had a song.

Brandy and I made the journey back to my car. "Where am I taking you?" I asked.

"Back to Park, puhlease," she said, singing the "puhlease" quite operatically.

"Okaaaaaay," I sang back.

And with that, all social awkwardness evaporated. We spent the ride back exchanging weird noises, screaming randomness, and generally being ridiculous. "I don't know what it is about you, but I feel like I can be so WEIRD," she yelled.

"You mean this isn't normal?" I asked. We laughed.

I dropped her off and felt like I had just met a long lost sibling. Any bitterness I'd had about the song was gone. If it meant being friends with someone so crazy, I'd sing over G and C all day.



Jen

"So...how do you feel about Batman?" I asked her.

"What?" she said with a laugh.

"Because that's where we're at right now," it had been a few days since I tried writing with Joel and Cameron.

"Oh. Well that doesn't sound good. Is it difficult to work with them?"

"I'm between a rock and a hard place," I had never used that expression before, but it seemed fitting. "It's like every time I offer something up, it gets shot down by at least one of them, and then the other agrees. There's no compromise. It sounds like a deranged mess."

"Hmm..." she was thinking. "What if you just write over the weekend, and have something concrete to show them? Maybe they'll be more likely to accept a semi-finished product."

"I can do that," I said. I wondered if this still counted as collaboration. I wondered if they would be mad that I did it on my own. I didn't write anything that weekend, paralyzed by the fear not knowing what to do.

"How's the song coming?" Jen asked on Monday.

"About that..." I said. "I'm having a lot of trouble actually."

We talked for a while and she came to a solution. "I'll have Cameron focus on doing the score and put Joel on the video, that way no one feels like they're getting their toes stepped on. Then you and I can work on writing the song together. How does that sound?"

It certainly sounded better than working with them. I met with her after class one day and we knocked the whole song out in about an hour. And it was good. We were both really excited to show everyone the next day. I knew everyone would love it. A small part of me wondered how Joel and Cameron were going to feel when they realized we hadn't used any of their original material. I knew they would be upset. I'd had to choose between doing what was best for the project or making them feel like they were a part of it. I chose the project.

Jess

"Alright, I'm gonna say something, and I would really appreciate it if no one interrupted me." One second prior to this, everyone had been shoving as many donuts as possible into their faces, courtesy of Jen. She'd brought them for working so well the past week. I was still smiling and licking frosting off my fingers when Jess said it.

"I don't want to call anyone out, but this is kind of becoming the Jordan show."

Excuse me? I looked at her in silence.

"Like, if Jordan does it it's great. And she's writing all the songs. And I mean, I'm not the only one that feels this way. I think we would just all like to feel like we matter, you know. And it's really been bothering me for a while so I just had to say something."

The class sat perfectly still. I felt all eyes on me. I was strangely calm for how angry I was.

"So, wait," I spoke evenly. "You *are* calling me out. You used *my* name. That's the definition of calling someone out."

"Well I mean, it's not just you that's just an example like I just feel that way generally and you're one of my best friends and so I don't want you to..." she kept going but I just stared daggers at her. I thought we were friends, too. She hadn't mentioned anything about this. Friends didn't unsuspectingly attack other friends in public.

Jen spoke up. "Ok, Jess this was not the right way to handle this. You should have come to me if you had a problem you didn't feel comfortable talking to Jordan about, not addressed it in front of the whole class. Maybe I delegated a little too much, but we are in the last couple weeks here and things really need to get done."

I knew this was about the song I'd rewritten with Jen. I'd played it a couple days ago for the class and they had loved it. The only problem was that no one had been given context. It looked to Jess like I had just chosen to rewrite the song myself, ditching Joel and Cameron and replacing their work with my own. But I hadn't, right? Everyone wanted me to. I was just doing what was best for the project, not making this into some kind of ego trip. Right? I clearly felt ok with working on something I wasn't happy with if it was with Caleb and Brandy. What made Joel and Cameron's so different? If I wasn't going to be consistent, was I really doing what the project needed? The more I thought about it the more I didn't know.

## Cameron

It was the week of our first performance. We had rehearsals every night, and Cameron was the musical director. This made me squirm. I knew that he was in total agreement with Jess about this being the “Jordan show” and he seemed determined to make sure he got his part in it. The first few rehearsals with the band were incredibly awkward. He was technically supposed to lead them, but I knew most of the songs and could teach them faster.

At our first full rehearsal, he was trying to teach one of his arrangements. He was incredibly flustered and began getting snappy with people who were struggling with their harmonies. Everyone was on edge after the first hour, so we moved to another song. It was a song I’d written with Brandy, the opening of the show. As we got to the end, I noticed Cameron had changed quite a bit about it. I decided not to say anything until I heard it. Maybe it would sound good.

It didn’t. It was awkward, and the melody sounded square. The ending had been changed to an odd number of bars, giving it a feeling of being unresolved. I hated it. I really, really hated it. We moved on to the finale. He totally removed our original ending and replaced it with something that I thought sounded corny and cheap.

I was livid. But my hand stayed down. We had less than a week to make this show happen. Trying to change anything now would lead to drama, setting us back even further. And I really didn’t want Cameron to hate me. I felt defeated. If it had ever been the Jordan show, it certainly wasn’t now.

## Jordan

“Oh man. What a crazy weekend,” Sarah said. It was 3am and we were all sitting outside of a church in Nashville.

“I know. I can’t believe we actually finished writing the show in time.” We laughed. We’d spent the last two nights performing the musical in Brown County. I felt an overwhelming sense of pride after each performance, but for the first time that I could remember, it wasn’t just pride in myself. Hearing everyone act, sing, play, and give their hearts to a show we had all written together was a feeling that made me well up with tears. During the finale of our final show, I had locked eyes with Cameron for a second. We were both grinning ear to ear, and I didn’t care about the stupid ending. At that moment, it was perfect. I didn’t care if anyone in the audience knew I wrote some of the songs. I didn’t care what they thought of me or if I had impressed them. What I cared about was that I had been a part of it.

Five hours later, I flipped my sunglasses down over my eyes and walked outside. Everyone was milling around the vans, waiting to head back to Muncie. Brandy had to leave straight for California, so she was saying goodbye to everyone already. I waited as she made the rounds and tried to think about anything but the facts. Fact, my time at Ball State was over. Fact, the musical was over. Fact, I would no longer be spending every day working with all the people I had grown to love. Fact, I hadn’t cried in public since I was nine. Fact, it was happening. Fact, thank God for sunglasses.

I watch her car roll down the dusty alley and then climb into the backseat of the Ball State van. As we pulled away, I laid my chair back and watched the hills pass by outside my window. I thought about the past five months and wondered how so much could have actually changed in such a short amount of time. These people had become some of my best friends. They understood me better than almost anyone else in the world. I felt like I belonged with them. And I was happy. I couldn't stop the tears as I remembered how I had started the semester trying to hide behind my talents, to prove myself worthy with my skills because I was afraid they wouldn't like who I was underneath everything. But they did.

They'd given me the chance to be myself, and to my surprise, I liked that person too. When I let my guard down, I actually liked collaborating with other people and appreciating their work. I liked watching someone else be in the spotlight. I liked the fact that what we had created together was far better than anything I could have come up with on my own. This project had shown me how to love myself and the people surrounding me. It reintroduced me to who I forgot I was.